

ORGANIZING

'Swedish Death Cleaning' gives excellent advice

"Putting your house in order, if you do it, is one of the most comforting activities, and the benefits of it are incalculable."
— Leonard Cohen, *The New Yorker*



Angie Hyché

From the first time I heard about Margareta Magnusson's book, "The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning: How to Free Yourself and Your Family From a Lifetime of Clutter," until its publication in English at the beginning of 2018, I had eagerly anticipated reading it. There had been much buzz about it among organizers since it is a topic that is well-known to us.

Magnusson is a Swedish artist and widow who is "somewhere between 80 and 100." Her book details a common practice in Sweden called death cleaning. The title alone is quite an attention grabber. Perhaps you assume that it means cleaning someone's home after they die. This is, after all, a very common occurrence here in the U.S. The tradition of Swedish death cleaning is an attempt to completely prevent this situation from occurring in the first place.

Here are the basics of Swedish death cleaning, (or *döstädning* in Swedish). As described by the author, "it is a term that means that you remove unnecessary things and make your home nice and orderly when you think the time is coming closer for you to leave the planet."

The benefits of completing this practice are numerous for both the aging and for those left behind. Regarding the loved ones left behind, Magnusson speaks candidly: "Do not ever imagine that someone will wish — or be able — to take time off to take care of what you didn't bother to take care of yourself. No matter how much they love you, don't leave this burden to them. Let me help you make your loved ones' memories of you nice — instead of awful."

Instead of awful, but if you have ever had to deal with someone else's things after their death, you understand completely. I am often contacted by clients who's just sessions after their death, and they now want my help because they don't want to burden their children with this task.

The longer you wait to deal with your accumulated possessions, the more difficult it will be. On top of the sheer volume

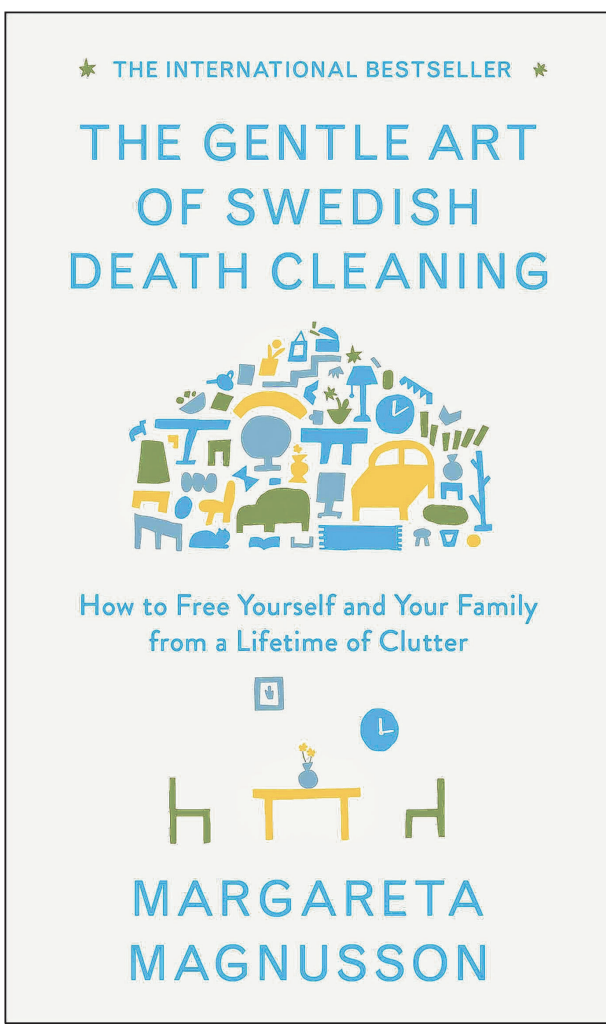
of items, you may be dealing with health issues that could limit your physical or mental ability to do the work yourself. It is never too early to start the process.

While you may be motivated to death clean for the people who are left behind, there are just as many rewards that you will reap for yourself. Going through all of your belongings will give you pleasure because you will be able to find meaning and memory in many of the items you kept. You'll be able to reflect on those items and how they were part of the story of your life. And when you find items that you don't remember why you kept (and you will likely find many of these), it should be much easier to part with them.

Beyond the memories, sorting through and organizing your things will definitely make your life run much more smoothly. If every item has a home, everything is simpler. Many people are "forced" to go through their belongings when they downsize, and clearly this is an ideal time. However, I caution you against just waiting for this time. You may decide to stay in your current home indefinitely. Or you may keep putting it off, wait too late and not be able to do the work.

While the theoretical portions of the book are inspiring, I believe the most useful sections are the ones with practical advice. In the section titled "How to Begin," the author wisely warns the reader that it will take quite a bit of time, so the sooner you can start, the better.

I especially love her advice about how to involve friends and family. "Tell your



loved ones and friends what you are up to. They might want to help you and even take things you don't need and also help you to move things that you cannot move alone."

I love this piece of advice: "Perhaps a grandchild or someone else you know is about to move into their first apartment. Invite them over and you can show them your things and chat about them, telling them stories about the objects (or perhaps even your

life) that they do not know." I cannot stress enough how wonderful this process could be if you take this advice to heart.

The bulk of the book is filled with practical tips to tackle different areas of the house, including clothes, books, the kitchen, cookbooks and family recipes, tools, collections, gardening tools and photographs.

The author wisely advises readers to start with an easy category. "An easy category is one with many items to choose from and without too much sentimental connection."

Another principle she suggests is to start with large items and finish with small. People are often overwhelmed with the prospect of going through everything, but once they get started and see progress, they are often encouraged and will build up the momentum to continue.

One unique suggestion in this book is to create a "Throw Away" box of things that you want to save for yourself only. "When I find things like these, things

that have absolutely no value to anyone else, but enormous value for me, I go and get my "Throw Away" box. Once I am gone, the box can be destroyed."

From my own experience as an organizer, I offer this word of caution. If you have saved a large number of things for family members, take the time to ask them if they actually want the items. It could be that many of the items you are hanging on to aren't needed or wanted, and that will make parting with them easier. Keep in mind that just because they don't value something you are offering them doesn't mean they don't value you. Younger generations in general look at their belongings much differently and value different things than their parents' generation.

What if it's not you who needs to worry about death cleaning, but your parents? How can you bring up the topic sensitively but purposefully? Again, the author comes through with practical advice. She suggests paying a visit and sitting down to gently discuss the topic by asking these questions:

You have many nice things. Have you thought about what you want to do with it all later on?

Do you enjoy having all this stuff? Could life be easier and less stuffy if we got rid of some of this stuff that you have collected over the years?

Is there anything we can do together in a slow way so that there won't be too many things to handle later?

You could point out that some items may pose a safety hazard. You might also offer to go ahead and take anything you would like to have that they aren't using. Above all, be patient and loving. Make sure they know that your motives are pure; you truly want to help them. It may take several conversations, but in the end, it will be worth a few moments of awkwardness to bring up the subject.

In conclusion, I highly recommend this book. Although the author is not a writer by trade and some of the wording is awkward, I believe the principles are very sound. I think this is clearly a message we all need to hear. In fact, we don't just need to hear it; we need to make a decision to act.

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